

Journey to the East: Faculty Spotlight with Michael Meyer

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Abstract

A spotlight on Professor Michael Meyer.

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For Michael Meyer, writing wasn't something to be discovered—it was always a natural part of him. Even as a kid growing up in rural Minnesota, the allure of storytelling was not something he could ignore. “Writers know they're writers,” Meyer says, and for him, that was absolutely true.

Raised in a rural Minnesotan family of construction workers, Meyer was a bit of an anomaly in his household. While his mother and father built homes, he was doing a different kind of building of his own—using stories to build bridges between cultures. Writing wasn't a mere hobby; it was how Meyer made sense of the world, turning everyday moments into something more meaningful. Despite growing up removed from the literary world, Meyer's passion for writing was evident early on. Recognizing his passion and penchant for the literary arts, his family and teachers supported his pursuit of writing. “I was lucky,” he recalled, “that they all saw writing not as an art, but as a viable trade.” At the age of 15, Meyer was offered the rare opportunity to skip traditional high school English classes in favor of working at his local newspaper.

After trading in small-town Minnesota for the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Meyer entered into a whole new world of writing and journalism. He quickly dove into the campus's robust literary community, centered on two daily campus newspapers, two daily city papers, two weeklies, and *The Onion*. In Madison Meyer found his peers, and also his competition. During this time, he started to see journalism as a craft that required creativity and curiosity—good journalism wasn't just about reporting facts, but about digging into the stories and people behind those facts.

A key moment during his college years was approaching a writer from *Sports Illustrated*. The advice he received—“inform your journalism by studying something else”—changed how Meyer thought about his future. He realized that while journalism required practice, it could be made richer by learning about other subjects. This led him to switch his major to Education, focusing on teaching English and Spanish in underperforming schools. He volunteered with the Urban League, and then the United Farm Workers at the Texas-Mexico border, where he wrote about immigrant laborers and their communities. These experiences showed Meyer the power of storytelling in giving a voice to underrepresented groups, something that would become central to his writing.

This experience soon led him to the Peace Corps, where he applied, expecting to be sent to a Spanish-speaking country. Much to his initial chagrin, Meyer was eventually offered China as a final option, which he reluctantly accepted. While far from his initial choice, this unexpected detour turned out to be a defining moment of his life and career. In China, he continued his experience as a storyteller, learning Mandarin and reporting from the rural Sichuan community where he trained English teachers. These firsthand experiences in China allowed him to bear witness to dramatic social and economic changes taking place in the country, and he felt a calling to tell the stories of those living through this revolutionary time.

It was his time in the Peace Corps that also taught him an invaluable lesson: “Never wait for permission to write.” Life as a volunteer earning \$100 monthly in the countryside provided a different point-of-view than a well-paid foreign correspondent living in a coastal metropolis. “It only took one ‘Yes’ from an editor reading my unasked-for story submission to realize that now that I had my foot in

the door, I had to keep it wedged in there by continuing to find the stories other writers were missing.” Rather than returning to the U.S. after finishing Peace Corps, Meyer went to Beijing to write. As the booming city tore down its architectural heritage, he moved into a dilapidated courtyard home near Tiananmen Squared, shared with several families and lacking a toilet and heat. That experience resulted in his first book, *The Last Days of Old Beijing*, which netted him a Whiting Writers Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and several other accolades. Next came the books *In Manchuria* and *The Road to Sleeping Dragon*. Both explore the diverse and often misunderstood regions of China, telling these stories through the lives of the ordinary people who live there.

Meyer’s next book, set in Taiwan and inspired by his time as Fulbright scholar there, examines the island’s history and complex relationship with the United States. This project also showcases the importance of letting the writing evolve and develop naturally. When he first began researching and writing for this book three years ago, he conceptualized it as his family’s integration into a Taipei neighborhood and his son’s experiences in a Taipei public school. In the time since, though, Meyer says the book is becoming a story of Taiwan’s untold history. Importantly, this is also a showcase of Meyer’s desire for ethical storytelling.

Since 2012, Meyer has been a Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. Meyer’s jokes that despite all the culture’s he’s had the pleasure to bridge, the toughest transition was coming to the University of Pittsburgh as a faculty member. In this setting, a world of academia and higher-education, Meyer is far removed from the rural and working-class environments he’s called home so many times. Yet, despite the culture shock, Meyer has quickly found his joy in the classroom, where he can draw upon his own rich life experiences to teach creative nonfiction. Whether it’s pushing students to think critically about their own writing, or challenging them to dissect the literary works of others with precision and intent, teaching is a rewarding experience.

One of his favorite classroom activities that he brings to students, a so-called “Paint the Pear” assignment, provokes students to mimic the techniques of past literary masters. Close, critical examination of works by authors from Jane Austen to James Baldwin helps students to understand the careful craftsmanship behind great writing. Much like painting or playing an instrument, writing is a skill that must be forged with careful study and practice, and this style of teaching typifies excellence in writing education.

Meyer’s pedagogy is rooted in giving students the freedom to explore, opting for active learning rather than traditional, didactic lectures. He encourages students to step into the world around them, reporting on real-life topics that speak to their goals and passions. It is clear the impact Meyer has made on the Pitt community; as the winner of Chancellor’s Distinguished Teaching Award, and as an Electus Faculty Fellow of the David C. Frederick Honors College, Meyer is an incredible asset to the university and beyond. His students have followed his footsteps into public service via the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps, as well as to graduate school (including his alma mater, UC-Berkeley) and careers in writing, from jobs in journalism to publishing prize-winning books.

When asked what advice he has for aspiring writers, Meyer is quick to encourage curiosity and exploration. He urges students to “pull on a thread” of interest and see where it leads—whether it’s a small observation or a larger question about society, even the smallest pool can lead us to wonderful places.

Every story has the potential to reveal something profound about the world surrounding us, and it's our job to unravel them. "Never wait for permission to write."